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# "THE QUEST OF THE LONESOME TUNES"

BY HOWARD BROCKWAY

EARLY in the Spring of 1916 an expedition into the Cumberland Mountains in the south-eastern corner of Kentucky was planned by Miss Loraine Wyman and myself. She has made the singing of folk-songs her especial field, and I, as a composer, looked forward to the discovery of vastly interesting material. During April we busily prepared for our approaching trip, the object of which was to be the quest of the old "song-ballets" of the mountain whites in the Appalachian Region. These preparations took the form of riding lessons (on my part), of inoculation, of vaccination and of the purchase of suitable equipment for outdoor life. Everything had been looked to, I thought, as the "Memphis Special" drew out of the Pennsylvania Station in New York that Saturday night. But . . . I had made one mistake of omission! I had not prepared myself for the astounding fact that I was to find myself transported back into the eighteenth century! Within forty-eight hours I became aware of the miracle which had taken place, and after a few days had adjusted my mental processes to the strange conditions. We stepped out of New York into the life of the frontier settler of Daniel Boone's time!

Here are people who know naught of the advance which has been made in the world outside of their mountains. It surpasses belief. Many of them neither read nor write, and their knowledge is summed up in the facts of their daily life. In woodlore they shine, in planting and cultivating their corn, raising "razor-back" hogs, carding, spinning, weaving and the distilling of their white "moonshine." Their land is a land of tumbled foothills—Pine Mountain, the highest in the Kentucky region, has an altitude of 3,000 feet. It is a land of primeval forest, "creeks" which are the larger streams and "branches," their tributaries. There are no roads up in the hills, and no vehicle with wheels is seen except in the vicinity of a town. Trails lead down a creek, and at intervals actually descend into the bed of the stream; one jumps from stone to stone for a mile or two before regaining the solid ground on one side or the other. When a "tide" (freshet) comes, one remains at home, as all communication with one's neighbors is at an end. "Nagging" is the mode of transportation, that is, riding mule or horse. I did not call upon the skill acquired in one riding lesson, but welcomed the opportunity to walk through such beautiful country, rough as the going was. Miss Wyman soon forsook the horse and we tramped some three hundred miles during our six-weeks' stay.

Amongst these people the folk-song exists to-day as it did in Great Britain centuries ago. Not as an accomplishment but as an ever-present mode of daily emotional expression. In the seventeenth century their ancestors brought the songs from

England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and they have been handed down from generation to generation orally. Songs which died out in the old country a century ago are still sung every day in our Appalachian Region. The statement has been made that amongst these people one can find nearly all the folk-songs ever sung in the British Isles, and perhaps the claim is not far wrong.

## OLD BALLADS OF BRITAIN

It was with a thrill that I heard my first "song-ballet"! It was sung to me by a little girl of twelve who was too shy to sing alone. She engaged the services of three sisters, all younger than herself, and even then insisted upon withdrawing into the "dog-trot," which is a hallway running through a log-cabin, covered but doorless. After a few minutes of whispered instructions the quaint old melody with its Elizabethan text came quavering to my ear, and stanza by stanza the Choir Invisible grew more confident. The melody was perfect as to form, the intonation true, and the story unfolded itself verse after verse with but slight deviations from the ancient original ballad. I sat in the rough little room which had no window and was lit by the daylight that entered by way of the door, and back and forth underneath my chair there scuttled a tiny razor-back shoat. The mother of the choir sat on the opposite side of the open fire and spat tobacco juice into the flames with unerring aim and range. Strange setting for the performance of an Elizabethan ballad! But I could only think: From many a frontier cabin has this old "Pretty Polly" sounded out into the night, to echo and die away in the stillness of the virgin forest.

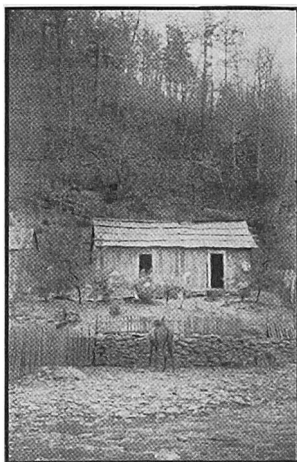


FIG. 1

The next day a young matron, perhaps some twenty-five years old, sang for me the beautiful old ballad of "Sweet William and Lady Margery" the while she unconcernedly suckled a tiny babe. Here again both tune and intonation were perfect and the text but slightly altered. It is intensely interesting to hear these people sing of things which lie entirely out of their ken. Had they the power of reading, one could not wonder at anything, but to hear these mountain folk born into the frontier life of the eighteenth century and spending their days amongst these isolated hills, sing of "ivory combs," of lords and ladies, of castles and moats, of steeds and knights, is an astonishing matter. It brings home to one the whole process of transmission, stretching back through the generations into the period when such things were of the Present. One old man had sung a ballad which contained the word "steed." He was asked what the word meant. He scratched his head for a moment and slowly replied, "Wall, I reckon hit is some sort o' hoss-animile." The context had assured him of that! We were told in answer to a similar query as

to a certain word: "Shucks! Hit jus' comes that way."

These people are the real simon-pure Americans! They are the "mountain whites" and are not to be confounded with the "poor white trash" of the South! A sturdy race, with individual characteristics, utterly different from the degenerate listless "poor whites" of the low country. In a unique way they have been isolated from the rest of the great teeming land, which has been covered by a network of railways and telegraph and telephone wires. Perhaps nowhere in the United States can one find a community so absolutely innocent of any knowl-

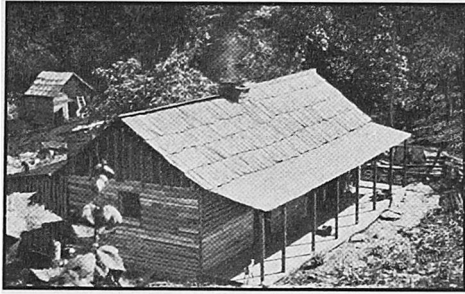


FIG. 2

edge of the progress of the world at large. One hears of ranchers in our West who live in utter isolation, with rides of a hundred miles to reach the nearest flag-station on a railroad. One hears also that the man owns a victrola and calls upon Harry Lauder, even perhaps Caruso and Farrar, to entertain him of an evening! But here in the Appalachian Region it is not so. Here a man may live but twenty miles from the nearest railroad and close his eyes for his last sleep without their having once rested upon a locomotive or a car! Those twenty miles may contain six or eight mountain ridges to be surmounted, their flanks and summits clothed by a very jungle of undergrowth and laurel thickets, all but defying the passage of a man's body. A daughter will marry and move over a mountain, perhaps not more than ten miles from her parents, and not see them again for ten years!

Life is a simple matter in these mountain wilds. The daily functions are few but imperative. The great staple article of diet is corn. From this is made the "corn-pone" and "hoe-cake" which are regular features at each meal. Razor-back hogs which run wild and are to be met constantly as one tramps over the mountains and through the woods need little attention. The planting and cultivating of the corn crop, on the other hand, calls for energy and perserverance to an almost superhuman degree. Some one has told of the Appalachian mountaineer who slipped while working on his corn crop and fell out of his cornfield and broke several ribs! This had always seemed to me to bear the marks of at least a slight exaggeration. After a few days in the depths of Harlan County, I recalled the tale and acquitted it of any divergence from strictest truth. Corn is planted on mountain-sides sometimes at an angle of fifty degrees, and the plow must find its way through such a maze of stones that one is appalled by the patience and physical endurance demanded on the part of the farmer. The women play their part in the work in the cornfield, and one sees frequently the entire family of father, mother and an army of children of graduated sizes busy

high up on the rugged flank of a mountain. They sing at their work with lusty lungs and the sense of limitless space about them. The songs they sing are the old "song-ballets" which were the object of our search and many times during our tramps were we thrilled by the strange and haunting melodies which were borne to us from on high, sometimes across the intervening valley.

It was with a peculiar sense of the fitness of things, almost too good to be true, that I found that the people themselves call these old songs "Lonesome Tunes"! Never was more apt title bestowed! It sums up the pathos and mournful quality of many of them most perfectly. We found that the songs are roughly divided into three classes. The old ballads of a narrative and sad character are "lonesome tunes." Those which deal with such a theme as the favorite one of a lover who departs, is absent "seven years" and then returns to marry his lady, are called "love songs." The third class contains all songs of a rollicking character and these are known as "fast music."

#### HAD NEVER HEARD OF NEW YORK

Our experiences in collecting the songs were varied and interesting. We were at first looked upon with undisguised suspicion. The presence of a "furriner" (any one who comes from without the mountains) at first makes the mountaineer suspect a government revenue spy in new guise. The wilderness in which we were tramping is full of the "moonshine stills," and our first endeavor was to free ourselves from this suspicion.

"Where do you come from? What are you a-doin' here?" These queries were fired at us point-blank with no moment's hesitation. After my invariable reply "We are from the Pine Mountain Settlement School and we are looking for the old song-ballets" the air was instantly cleared, and in spite of a wonderment which was all-consuming, they showed a spirit of hospitality and courtesy which no words could describe.

The poise and innate dignity of these mountain people made a deep and increasing impression upon us, as the weeks of our stay among them mounted up. They are illiterate but not uncultivated. Their ignorance of the outer world is absolute, but, as the preservation of the old song-ballets shows, they have a culture all their own. To one old man I said "We have come all the way from New York to get these songs." I saw in his face no evidence of any sense of surprise at the journey we had undertaken and repeated "New York, you know." Again no answering glimmer. Slightly piqued I said "You know where New York is"? and he seriously replied "Naw. Never heard of hit." Another man told me he knew where New York was, but "didn't know hit war nigh the water." These astonishing instances are the result of isolation, of lack of the

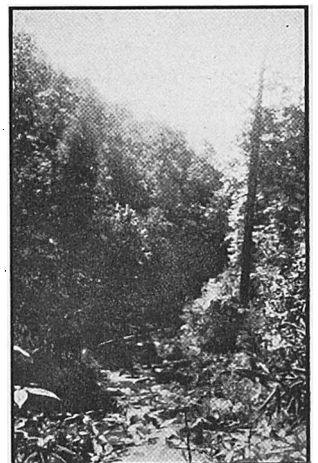


FIG. 3

power to read and thus keep in touch with the world outside; yet the conversation which I held with these very two men was significant proof to me of their possession of thinking minds and a philosophy of life both broad and trenchant. Our regular process of accomplishing our purpose rarely failed, just on account of this very quality in the mental equipment of the mountaineers. They were interested in our quest as soon as they felt our serious point of view. This established, they entered into the matter with zest and enthusiasm, and often we spent many hours at a stretch, exchanging songs and recalling the stories of ballads which might frequently run into twenty odd stanzas. The hunt for particular and rare old Elizabethan ballads was one which made us thrill oftentimes as the gold-seeker must thrill when he finds proof of the presence of the precious metal. Perhaps it might be some ballad the mother had sung years ago as she worked about the little log-cabin, when the present singer was a tiny bare-footed child, "rocking" at an improvised target just outside the door with the ever present stones. Verse by verse it would emerge from the *hinterland* of memory, and we would almost breathlessly await its reconstruction, afraid to suggest, for fear of breaking the thread which led away back into the Past. It seemed sometimes to me as though I were groping and feeling my way with the singer's mind through the generations back into the England of the seventeenth century from which his forefathers had journeyed forth into the fabulous New World! They brought with them these priceless old treasures and the vital quality of them has kept them alive through all the generations in spite of obstacles which would have killed any oral heirlooms of less real significance.

#### FIND OF A BEAUTIFUL OLD TUNE

These songs as I found them were simply melodies unaccompanied. The mountaineers have none of the instinct for part-singing which one finds so marked in the case of the negro, for instance. I heard, at different times, singing by large groups of men, women and children and they sang strictly in unison. Not even the familiar second part so customarily sung as the "alto" by impromptu choruses in our communities was ever essayed. In gathering the songs Miss Wyman and I made a division of the labor. She collected the text and I the melody. The patience of the singers was in

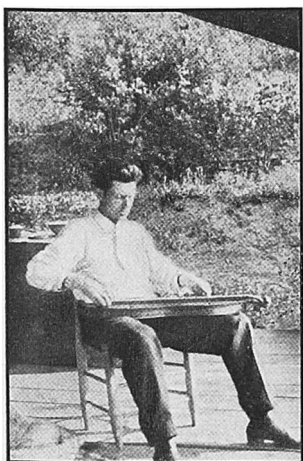


FIG. 4

almost all cases unbounded. They would sing an entire ballad with its wellnigh endless number of verses, and cheerfully go over it slowly, so that the words might be accurately transcribed. The writing of the melody was often an affair of puzzling difficulty. The melodic intervals were frequently of an unusual and curious character. To add to the difficulty, there was the fact that the voices, while excellent as natural voices,

were untrained — and this made the question of intonation in the case of certain steps an important one. In Knott County, for instance, we found a man who came from a neighborhood famous for singers. He was born on "Carr Creek" and that is always referred to as "Singin' Carr." Amongst the lovely melodies which he gave me, with a zest which I revered in him, there was one of such haunting and pathetic beauty

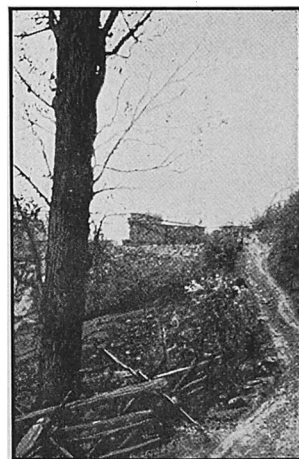


FIG. 5

that it seemed too good to be true. I wrote it down very carefully and the longer I considered it, the more worried I became lest my desire had lent cunning to my ear and had even led my pencil to write the intervals which I fain would have come true! I had been told beforehand that this man could also play on the fiddle. I bethought me that it would serve as a perfect test of the intervals if he were to play them as he sang them, and casually asked him if he played, too. He modestly said that he could play "tunes," and brought out the fiddle. It was a regularly strung violin and to my utter astonishment he played upon it left-handed! I soon forgot the strangeness of his method of playing, however, for my heart leapt with joy as he reproduced the wonderful old melody and I realized that it had come true! The intervals were exactly as he had sung them, and in my music pad I had one of the most remarkable melodies I had ever encountered in the entire literature of music! I have shown this old tune to a number of my colleagues and all of them have agreed with my estimate.

Through the many generations of oral transmission changes have of course taken place, both in text and music. Astonishingly little change as to words, one must admit, when the process of transmission and the long period of years are considered. The melodies, on the other hand, have experienced a much greater metamorphosis, and in almost all cases the changes have added new beauty and poignancy. The old tune mentioned above is a remarkable example of this cumulative beauty, and as it stands today it defies any attempt to discover its origin. I feel the more confident in making this statement, because the greatest expert of the world on the subject of folk-song said to me "Mr. Brockway, I do not know where this wonderful old tune comes from!"

#### HOW TO PLAY THE DULCIMORE

At rare intervals in our search we encountered a fiddle, old, used to service and evidently a member of the family, with all the distinguishing traits of rough appearance and dependable quality. More frequently we found the "dulcimore," which is the real indigenous Appalachian instrument. It is made in the mountains and fits its environment in quite a charming and piquant way. It seems most thoroughly a part of the spirit of the culture represented by the old songs! In shape it is most like

a "pochette," the little instrument carried by dancing-masters in the olden days, although very much larger of course. It is strung with three strings, either gut or wire. Two of these are tuned in unison while the third is tuned a fifth below. The outer one of the two in unison is the only fretted string, the other two supplying a drone bass, giving somewhat the effect of the bagpipe. The dulcimore (accent on the last syllable) is held on the knees and the strings are plucked with a piece of leather or a quill. The melody is played upon the fretted string, for which purpose a quill or small stick is employed. We found that the dulcimore players were very particular as to the media employed, and that the adherents of the different schools, divided by the use of quill or leather, were distinctly temperamental in their allegiance! I heard one man sing and accompany himself most skilfully, and the effect was extremely delightful and quaint. He was apparently a *virtuoso* and his performance will always remain in my memory as the unique one of my experiences in the Kentucky trip.

When we reached small towns which were in communication by stage with the nearest railroad

we found banjos and guitars. The realization was soon forced upon us, however, that the "banjo-pickers" and "guitar-pickers" were never conversant with the real object of our quest. They played a type of song which had for us no interest whatever, with little or no relationship to the "song-ballet." This brought home to our minds the displeasing conviction that the great deposit of beautiful folk-songs in the Appalachian Region is bound to suffer contamination and to be utterly obliterated as the mining and lumber railroads gradually creep nearer and nearer to the heart of the mountains. It is indeed a sad and depressing thought. Once let such a community gain communication with the outer world, and amidst all the advantages which enter, there will also come the insidious appeal of the trivial and commonplace music of our musical comedies. The newer generations will wish to ape their fellows of the great world outside the mountains in playing and singing the popular song of the day, and the rich store of ancient folk-song will go the way it has long since gone in Great Britain. Would that we might gather in the entire harvest before the killing blight falls upon it!

Howard Brockway

## THE FRUITS OF "KULTUR": "THE BURNING OF MONTMORENCY"

(See page 231)

IT must have mortified the Germans in the beginning of the world-war to discover that people outside the Empire were surprized at the brutality and unnecessary destructiveness of her soldiery. For that showed the world forgetful of Germania, and a woman forgives anything rather being overlooked! Certainly the outrageous blackmail and murderous revenge perpetrated by German troops on innocent Chinese at the bidding of the Kaiser publicly expressed should have lingered in the memory of Americans and Europeans. Some day, when the story of the aftermath of the Boxer troubles comes to be written it may "transpire," as the journalist says, that these hapless Chinese did not lack, even then, some small measure of avengement and that German troops in China had to atone in person—a few of them at any rate—for the disgusting conduct of their officers toward Chinese men and women.

But apparently that was forgotten. What seems stranger is forgetfulness of their conduct in France in 1870. Montmorency was a beautiful little town to the north of Paris and was without any military importance. Yet the enrolled brigands of Prussia's Generalstab wantonly and without purpose obliterated that town.

We reproduce a painting by F. Lix of the revels of a German staff—"wine, women and song"—as the pretty town of Montmorency was burning. It is well to recall now the noxious kind of human being that has been fostered by *Kultur*.

When the bands of robbers that plundered France in the fifteenth and Germany in the sixteenth century and sacked, fired and ruined towns and castles were compelled to answer, they defended their course by saying that it was done to warn other towns to hurry and pay blackmail or expect the same treatment.

Exactly the same excuse is brought forward today by these scourges of civilization to explain their loathsome behavior in Belgium and France. In fact, they have to say something as a pretext, when the slaughter of Chinese, of Hereros in Africa, of women and children on the high seas is brought to their attention. They lack the honesty to confess that they want and intend to have the land and goods and bodies of other people. A remnant of shame forces them to such childish, such effeminate crookedness. Germania is a woman who has lost all decency and in her depravity makes those who are men stare aghast.

